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VOLUME V

# THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MEDIA STUDIES

Media Effects/Media Psychology

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## Media Entertainment as a Result of Recreation and Psychological Growth

Tilo Hartmann

### ABSTRACT

Media entertainment refers to users' enjoyment of media-induced sensations. This chapter argues that users feel entertained to the extent that media supports their adaptive tendencies to recreate and grow psychologically. Within the boundaries of their physiological regulation, users are believed to engage actively in cognitive, affective, and behavioral challenges imposed by media, in order to grow psychologically. However, a lack of physiological resources may limit users' engagement in challenges and consequently strengthen their enjoyment of more recreational and supportive media content.

### Theorizing Media Entertainment

Media entertainment has been characterized traditionally as an enjoyable experience for the user (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Zillmann, 2003). Such a perspective views entertainment as a hedonistic user experience, typically triggered by cheerful comedy shows, light-hearted romantic stories, stimulating action movies, or relaxing media offerings (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998). In contrast, alternate approaches suggest that users may also feel entertained by media offerings evoking less hedonistic, but more serious and perhaps even sad experiences (Oliver, 2009; Tan, 2008).

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This notion corresponds to the observation that media users may actively seek media content that evokes sad feelings, such as "tearjerker" movies, or horror or action movie content which induces aversive states such as fear or suspense (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Mundorf & Mundorf, 2003; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Users may also enjoy these typically aversive states in the safe context of media exposure.

As such, media entertainment does not necessarily comprise only light-hearted enjoyment. Rather, users may feel entertained provided that media content stimulates any state of enjoyment. For example, users may enjoy a distressing action movie as they reappraise positively aversive states triggered by the movie (Andrade & Cohen, 2002; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). In such a case, both positive and negative affects (or enjoyment obtained from aversive states) underlie users' feelings of being entertained. Typically, in order to feel entertained, users' pleasure responses must outweigh negative sensations experienced during exposure.<sup>1</sup> A number of examples exist in which negative sensations prevail, however, and as a consequence users fail to feel entertained. For example, users may feel bored by media content (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998). Alternatively, users may fail to enjoy as a consequence of feeling cognitively and affectively overwhelmed, deeply threatened or annoyed by media content (Zillmann, 1988). Taken together, this suggests that "users feel entertained over a certain episode [...], if they enjoy the ongoing chain of their own primary affective responses" (Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009, p. 545), triggered by media content.

Media entertainment research suggests a number of different mechanisms as to why users feel entertained and enjoy their primary responses to media content (for reviews see Bosshart & Macconi, 1998; Bryant & Miron, 2002; Klimmt & Vorderer, 2009; Oliver, 2009; Vorderer, 2003; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009; Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). The aim of this chapter is not to review each of these mechanisms separately, but to discuss media entertainment from an integrated theoretical perspective derived from pleasure research. Research on pleasure in sexual intercourse (Boul, Hallam-Jones, & Wylie, 2009), food intake (Rozin, 1999), economical behavior (Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997), decision-making (Hsee & Hastie, 2006), art appreciation (Silvia, 2005), music (Huron, 2005), literature (Nell, 1988), and audiovisual media exposure (Miron, 2006), suggests that pleasure responses are evoked typically by biological and psychological mechanisms that are responsible for promoting adaptive functioning throughout evolution (e.g., Cabanac, Pouliot, & Everett, 1997; Miron, 2006; Rozin, 1999; White, 1959). According to Damasio (1999, p. 78), "pleasure seduce[d] us into good behavior." Likewise, Kahneman et al. (1997, p. 379) argue that "pleasure is evidently a 'go' signal, which guides the organism to continue important activities such as foreplay or consuming sweet, energy-rich food." An abundance of studies have similarly documented the health-promoting effects of pleasure (Esch & Stefano, 2004; Zillmann, 2000). Pleasure responses thus appear tied to basic – and often adaptive – human tendencies. In line with this, I suggest that people enjoy media content based upon pleasure responses which are tied to two adaptive tendencies; to recreate and to grow psychologically through engagement in challenges.

## The Enjoyment of Recreation and Psychological Growth

Throughout evolution, the human organism has struggled to sexually reproduce and to survive in potentially risky and unstable environments. Several mechanisms (or adaptations) that have evolved throughout this struggle for survival have become tied biologically to the reward or pleasure system of the human organism (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). Via genetic reproduction, these mechanisms have become an integral part of being human. In accordance with these basic human mechanisms, contemporary environments, including media environments, are able to trigger pleasure responses (Miron, 2006; Ohler & Nieding, 2006). I argue that two of these basic mechanisms are crucially important in the media entertainment context; recreation (via homeostatic regulation and the replenishment of exhausted resources) and psychological growth (via engagement in challenges).

Recreation is adaptive, allowing "individual functional systems that have been called upon during a stressful experience to return to their prestressor levels" (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, p. 205). Homeostatic regulation, that is, the ability to keep physiological resources in balance, may be considered part of an individual's tendency to recreate. Homeostatic regulation maintains important parameters such as body temperature, arousal, and metabolic states within the optimal life-functioning range (Damasio, 1999). Pleasure provides the motivation to regulate and return imbalanced states to normal levels ("alliesthesia," Cabanac, 1985; Saper, Chou, & Elmquist, 2002). For example, food intake is more pleasurable when people are hungry compared with satiated. Likewise, arousing media content is more pleasurable when people are bored rather than stressed (Zillmann, 1988).

In general, homeostatic regulation is eased by life-promoting environments. Humans possess a natural tendency to seek and enjoy supportive environments, particularly when they require recreation (Sonntag & Fritz, 2007). Due to the genuine importance of this mechanism, pleasure responses appear to be triggered simply by the awareness of supportive surroundings. For example, the mere perception of beautiful, or sweet and energy-rich objects seems to trigger pleasure (Kahneman et al., 1997). As such, humans may enjoy furnishing their living environment with flowers (Haviland-Jones, Rosario, Wilson, & McGuire, 2005) or being immersed in nature, such as a lush meadow or forest, particularly when feeling exhausted (Kaplan, 1995). Likewise, users appear to enjoy perceiving supportive environments portrayed by the media, particularly if they undergo depleting life episodes (Katz & Foulkes, 1962).

However, the principle of pleasurable recreation is not sufficient to explain all types of media entertainment, such as enjoyment of shocking horror movies or distressing videogames. As White (1959, p. 315) states, "we may seek rest and minimal stimulation at the end of the day, but that is not what we seek in the morning. Even

when its primary needs are satisfied and its homeostatic chores are done, an organism is alive, active, and up to something." According to White, humans have an innate motivation to improve their "capacity to interact effectively with [their] environment" (p. 297) and, as such, engage readily in various environmental challenges. Engaging in challenges is adaptive, as it may result in learning and skill development, that is, progress towards more efficient interaction with the environment. Successfully engaging in challenges is rewarded with pleasure. This notion has been addressed in Positive Psychology under the label "psychological growth." It receives specific support from research into self-determined activity and intrinsic enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In general, users may enjoy media exposure not only because the situation allows them to recreate, but also because it provides important learning experiences, which improve capabilities and allows psychological growth (e.g., Oliver, 2009; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010; Vorderer, Steen, & Chan, 2006). Accordingly, enjoyment of both recreation and psychological growth may provide two crucial aspects of media entertainment. These aspects will be elaborated further in the remainder of this chapter.

## Enjoyable Recreation During Media Exposure

Media entertainment is typically pursued during leisure time, perhaps after a strenuous day at work (Sonntag & Fritz, 2007). Leisure time situations are typically self-determined and free of external pressures. People may use such leisure time for recreational activities, that is, to recover from the preceding demanding episode (Sonntag & Fritz, 2007). As understood in this chapter, recreation refers to both the harmonizing of imbalanced physiological states (homeostatic regulation) and the replenishment of exhausted physiological resources, with both processes linked to pleasurable responses. Media exposure provides a comparatively effortless way to recreate.

## Homeostatic Regulation

Homeostatic regulation relates to maintaining physiological states, such as body temperature or arousal, within the optimal life-functioning range (Damasio, 1999). Rather than being fixed, these optimal levels vary according to a person's condition (e.g., in order to fight an infection, a comparatively high body temperature may be rewarded, Cabanac, 1971), and higher-order cognitive goals (e.g., a higher body temperature may be desired in a sauna). Successful regulation towards optimal levels results in pleasure. Alliesthesia research (Brondel & Cabanac, 2007; Cabanac, 1971, 1985;), for example, demonstrates that sensory stimuli may arouse pleasant or unpleasant sensations dependent upon current internal states and goals. Likewise,

reversal theory (Apter, 1989, 1992) indicates that arousal is perceived as either pleasurable or aversive based upon the optimal level sought by an individual. For example, high levels of arousal will be experienced as pleasurable when an individual seeks excitement, yet experienced as unpleasant when an individual seeks relaxation. Equally, low levels of arousal will be experienced as pleasurable when seeking relaxation, yet unpleasant when seeking excitement.

A similar argument has been put forward by mood management theory (Helweg & Weaver, 1989; Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Mood management theory provides one of the most popular media entertainment theories addressing pleasure responses to media content and proposes that individuals use the media in order to terminate noxious states and intensify hedonic states. More specifically, the theory argues that people seek and enjoy the reduction of negative mood states and the enhancement of positive mood states (valence hypothesis). Sharing similarities with reversal theory, mood management theory further claims that users enjoy media provided media support their homeostatic regulation. People may thus seek and enjoy exciting media content in states of *extreme* boredom, yet seek soothing media content in states of *extreme* stress (arousal hypothesis). Existing research appears to support this assumption (e.g., Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010).

Findings related to the arousal hypothesis of mood management theory support the notion that people enjoy media content, which provides recovery from imbalanced physiological states. However, in contrast to reversal theory, mood management theory deals only with enjoyment among users attempting to recover from *extreme* states of overarousal or underarousal. In this context, reversal theory may complement the existing theoretical corpus by studying more broadly users' enjoyment of media content, which helps shifting arousal states towards optimal levels. Taken together, media exposure appears to be entertaining provided it supports users' recreational needs and enables them to regulate imbalanced physiological states.

### Recovery of Physiological Resources

Recreation also refers to the recovery of depleted cognitive and physiological resources. Research on ego-depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) suggests that, for example, demanding cognitive activities, such as decision-making or abstract thinking, require volitional energy. Volitional energy is a cognitive resource that is based partly on blood glucose expended by these activities. If depleted, an organism's "readiness to re/act" becomes limited. Ego-depleted individuals thus become more passive and less regulated. They exhibit a stronger tendency for confirmatory information processing (Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2008), are more susceptible to impulsive choices (Baumeister, 2009), suffer worse performance in logical reasoning (Schmeichel, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2003) and other demanding tasks, and abandon these tasks sooner than non-depleted individuals. Volitional

energy, however, may be replenished via sleep, sugar intake, and also via pleasurable media stimuli (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). When depleted, people may avoid activities demanding self-regulation and, instead, may engage in accessible and scarcely challenging activities, such as media use. Exposure to entertaining media may be particularly attractive, as it promises to replenish exhausted resources.

While direct empirical evidence is scarce, weary, and ego-depleted individuals may indeed seek media entertainment as a recreational experience (Reinecke, 2009a, 2009b). Anderson, Collins, Schmitt, and Jacobvitz (1996) note, for example, that stressful life events predict length of exposure to televised entertainment, particularly comedy shows. This may be plausibly interpreted in light of mood management theory, as stressful life events are likely to be associated with strain and exhausted resources. In the Anderson et al. (1996) study, stressed men tended to watch more violent action, and horror programming, while stressed women tended to watch more game shows. A panel study by Brosius, Rossmann, and Elnain (1999) likewise indicated that individuals who felt more depleted following an increased workload in their jobs spent more time watching entertaining television content. These findings may suggest that depleted individuals find media exposure pleasurable as it helps replenish exhausted resources.

Recreation requires the "dismantling" of existing real-world stressors. This typically implies that people become distracted and psychologically detached from such stressors (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Entertainment research frequently suggests that users enjoy the distraction of comforting media realities in order to escape troublesome life conditions (Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). Escapism refers to the idea that people occasionally lack the coping capabilities for everyday-life problems. Under such conditions, people may enjoy media distraction. In an experimental study by Moskalenko and Heine (2003), after receiving negative feedback, participants sought distraction from television for a longer time than participants receiving positive feedback. Media content may be particularly distracting when it is highly absorbing (Zillmann, 1988), perhaps because a gripping storyline provides ample opportunity for wishful fantasizing (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). In sum, these findings suggest that people may find pleasurable relief in the distraction provided by media offerings.

### Recreating in Supportive Environments

In general, people may find it pleasurable to become immersed in life-promoting, that is, supportive and peaceful environments, particularly when seeking recreation (Kaplan, 1995). Likewise, individuals seeking recreation may find particular enjoyment in using media as a self-determined activity in a sheltering environment (i.e., warm and safe), such as their own private living room. Environments may be also supportive, because they foster social inclusion (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Indeed, people frequently enjoy media in social settings with friends (Bryant & Miron, 2002;

Sapolsky & Zillmann, 1978). In addition, media may provide vivid illusions of social connectedness. For example, people may feel included socially via engaging in parasocial interactions with media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Experimental studies show that users enjoy media content more if they feel that they are being addressed directly by a media character (Auter & Davis, 1991; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). While these studies suggest that social connectedness is an important aspect of media entertainment, it remains plausible, albeit untested, that especially weary or depleted individuals seek and enjoy social companionship via their media exposure.

Individuals appear to prefer and enjoy different media content when weary or depleted compared to when they are well-rested (Brondel & Cabanac, 2007). For instance, depleted individuals will avoid cognitively taxing media content when seeking to recreate from previous demanding cognitive tasks (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Indeed, depleted individuals may fail to enjoy any media content requiring further self-regulation. Accordingly, depleted individuals are unlikely to engage in challenging media content, particularly when the challenges imposed require self-regulatory efforts which will drain already impoverished resources. Individuals will seek engagement in mediated challenges matching their capabilities for the sake of enjoyment, only to the extent that the necessary physiological resources are available.

### Enjoyable Psychological Growth During Media Exposure

Humans are not purely recreating organisms, regulating physiological states and recovering exhausted resources. Rather, they have a natural tendency to engage in risky environments for the sake of "psychological growth and integration" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 3). This view is commonly expressed in Positive Psychology: "Rather than viewing people as passively waiting for a [physiological] disequilibrium, we view them as naturally inclined to act on their inner and outer environments, engage in activities that interest them, and move toward personal and interpersonal coherence" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 230). In accordance with this view, humans, driven by curiosity and interest, have a tendency to explore their environment in order to improve capabilities, and gain a better understanding of their own existence. This may be viewed as a tendency to seek psychological growth.

Following White (1959), humans achieve psychological growth by engaging continuously in challenging interactions with the environment. Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 229) suggest that "it is part of the adaptive design of the human organism to engage interesting activities, to exercise capacities, to pursue connectedness in social groups, and to integrate intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences into a relative unity."

Generally speaking, psychological growth is achieved via the mastery of challenges. As long as these challenges are sought autonomously, their mastery is enjoyable and accompanied primarily by the perception of competence (and, frequently, social connectedness; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, people may enjoy mastering previously incomplete challenges in a videogame, particularly if achieved with a friend (Tamborini et al., 2010).

However, engaging in challenges is cognitively and physiologically taxing, and the outcome is often uncertain. Individuals may thus expend valuable resources discovering that their capabilities are insufficient to master a challenge. Two explanations exist as to why humans are inclined nevertheless to engage in challenges. Firstly, such engagement is driven by pleasurable emotions such as interest and curiosity (Silvia, 2005; Tan, 2008; White, 1959), which may counterbalance simultaneous negative experiences (Cabanac, 1992). Secondly, people are frequently willing to forego pleasure for the sake of long-term goals (Blascovich, 2008; Tamir, 2009). Engaging in challenges serves the ultimate long-term goal of psychological growth and mastery is rewarded with (intrinsic) pleasure (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They are thus likely to be sought even when they are effortful.

The term "challenge," as used here, refers to a variety of cognitive, affective, visceral, and behavioral tasks imposed by the media environment. Challenges are taxing, require the investment of resources, and their outcome is comparatively uncertain. Mastery of challenges reveals the existence of important capabilities among individuals. Apter (1992) distinguishes between four types of challenges; (1) exploration of novel information, (2) voluntary confrontation with frustration, (3) overcoming basic physical limitations, and (4) active violation of social rules and other expectancies. Likewise, media content may challenge people in many ways. For example, entertainment media provide an abundance of novel information, ranging from social information from soap operas, novelty from fantasy worlds, and factual information via documentaries and quiz shows. Media also frequently challenge users by confronting them with innate body reactions such as fear. Media may further challenge users by violating social norms, displaying harsh forms of violence, sexual conduct, and other such unacceptable behavior. To reduce complexity, the array of challenges provided by entertainment media may be grouped roughly into cognitive, affective or visceral, and behavioral challenges. Some typical examples are discussed below.

### Cognitive Challenges

Typically, enjoyment is induced when individuals engage in cognitive challenges and recognize that they are able to comprehend effectively (Biedermann & Vessel, 2006). Cabanac et al. (1997) suggest that pleasure results from effective cognitive mental work. In one of their studies, students displayed greater enjoyment of a poem, the more they were able to comprehend it. Likewise, Silvia (2005) noted that people found cognitively challenging abstract art more enjoyable when titles were provided allowing a meaningful



interpretation, rather than if no titles were provided. Comprehension of very familiar stimuli that are not cognitively challenging at all may also not be enjoyable as it fails to reveal psychological growth (Biedermann & Vessel, 2006). Much entertainment media provide comparatively familiar content and may be considered moderately cognitively challenging. Reasonably familiar stimuli are perceived as more pleasurable than entirely novel or overly familiar stimuli (Zajonc, 1968). Media content may thus be entertaining simply because it displays moderately novel content, less familiar than the real world, yet more familiar than abstract art, for example. Media content that is extremely easy (e.g., children's movies) or extremely difficult to comprehend (e.g., complex arthouse movies) may not be typically enjoyable. Accordingly, comprehension of media content may be enjoyable provided it involves the mastery of moderately difficult cognitive challenges.

In line with the idea that comprehension of moderately novel media is enjoyable, individuals may also appreciate media content that is cognitively challenging, because it puts their life into perspective. Most people become anxious about chaotic life circumstances, yet enjoy information that helps them make sense of life. Research into the principles of a good life and maturity (King, 2001), and ego-development (Bauer & McAdams, 2004), suggests that people enjoy gaining a more complex and integrated view of themselves, their life, and their world. Such insights move beyond mere positive self-related information and instead refer to more transcendental life aspects. Growing research of relevance to media entertainment indicates that users appreciate thought-provoking movies which provide meaningful insights (Oliver, 2008, 2009; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011). Such meaningful experiences typically entail mixed emotions (i.e., pleasurable yet also painful facets, Oliver, 2008). Users may also experience meaningful and thought-provoking moments in movies that are funny or suspenseful predominantly (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010).

### Affective Challenges

Users may also enjoy mastering aversive innate body reactions triggered by the media. Akin to hedonic reversals and pleasurable "mind-over-body realizations" in the context of painful food-intake (Rozin, 2000, p. 980), media users may take pleasure in many innate or highly automatic body sensations, which are actually painful or distressing (e.g., Andrade & Cohen, 2007; deWied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994). Horror movies provide one such example. Ample research demonstrates that males particularly enjoy the fear and distress induced by horror movies, especially if they are able to demonstrate their skills of mastery before a distressed female coviewer (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Zillmann & Weaver, 1996; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). Reversal theory (Apter, 1989) provides a useful framework for studying such hedonic reversals. According to this theory, dangerous stimuli may be experienced as exciting, provided individuals perceive themselves as surrounded by a "protective frame" (e.g., observing a spider through a thick

glass). Such a protective frame may be purely imaginative. For example, males may enjoy horror movies more than females as they feel more protected and more capable of withstanding induced fear. Research by Andrade and Cohen (2007) suggests that such a "protective frame-of-mind" indeed moderates the impact of fear-inducing horror movies on enjoyment.

### Behavioral Challenges

Mastery of behavioral or interactive challenges is pivotal to videogame play. Almost all videogames challenge the user's hand-eye coordination. Videogames offer challenges with difficulty levels which adapt to the skills of the user and further provide clear feedback to inform users of their progress. Users may feel successful (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Frey, 2007) and competent when mastering the challenges imposed by videogames. Due to these structural aspects, videogames are capable of inducing pleasurable experiences of flow (Sherry, 2004).

It may be argued that non-interactive media allow users to vicariously experience the mastery of behavioral challenges. Dramatic narratives within action movies, for example, typically focus on the struggle between a protagonist (the good guy) and an antagonist (the bad guy), usually concluding with a happy ending in which the good guy triumphs over the bad guy. This happy ending may be enjoyable as the victorious protagonist communicates to the user that his (ideological) in-group is more powerful than the alternative. From such a perspective, users may bask in the glory of the protagonist and feel as though their own capabilities have been improved (Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989).

Ample evidence in the context of disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; for an overview see Raney, 2003), one of the most important and established theories in the domain of media entertainment, indicates that viewers of dramatic content indeed demonstrate enjoyment when good triumphs over bad. Drama typically builds upon a struggle for justice. Viewers find enjoyment in the uplifting realization that the world is a just place and that the group whose values they share triumphs over the group whose values they do not share. Physiological processes play an important role in this process. Excitation transfer theory (e.g., Zillmann, 2006) suggests that the time-compressed chain of events in a stressful drama builds high arousal states in users. These high states of arousal turn into euphoria upon realization that the good guys triumphed over the bad guys.

### General Characteristics of Enjoyable Challenges

Taken together, media offer an abundance of easily accessible challenges. In general, these challenges promise the most enjoyment when they are relevant to the user, when the user can autonomously engage in the challenge, and when the challenge



is of optimal difficulty (Blascovich, 2008; Rozin, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Sherry, 2004; White, 1959).

Challenges are perceived as relevant provided they inform an individual about a relevant aspect of himself or herself. Users are unlikely to enjoy the mastery of a challenge that indicates the existence of capabilities which are irrelevant. Consequently, the enjoyment of a given challenge varies in accordance with both gender and age. Male users, for example, appear to find greater enjoyment in challenges related to power, such as sports or violent videogames (Jansz, 2005). In contrast, female users appear to be more interested in challenging capabilities related to their social environment (for a general review of gender differences in media entertainment see Oliver, 2000).

In addition, research on intrinsic enjoyment and motivation indicates that people do not enjoy challenges when they feel compelled to master them. Rather, they enjoy engaging in challenges autonomously (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Use of entertainment media may frequently be accompanied by a sense of autonomy as it typically takes place at home during leisure time. During such leisure time, individuals are comparatively free to choose whatever media content they wish. They may determine freely the challenges in which they become involved. Accordingly, they may enjoy such media imposed challenges. Bidjerano and Newman (2010), for example, noted that autonomy in media activity choice was positively related to reported enjoyment and inversely related to anxiety associated with these activities.

Furthermore, research regarding both achievement and intrinsic motivation suggests that challenges are most enjoyable when they are of optimal difficulty (Harter, 1978). This implies that the challenge must be so new or complex that it can only be potentially mastered if individuals spend considerable effort and fully utilize their existing capabilities. Mastering challenges of optimal difficulty provides not only positive feedback but also new insights regarding the self. In contrast, challenges that are too easy are uninformative, as their mastery is obvious. In turn, challenges which are too difficult cannot be mastered and thus provide only negative feedback about existing skills and capabilities. Taken together, this suggests that media content may offer a diverse array of challenges. Media users may enjoy engaging autonomously with relevant challenges of optimal difficulty.

### Physiological Boundaries of Challenge-Seeking

Users may engage willingly in challenges promoting their psychological growth. However, challenge-seeking necessarily occurs within the limitations of recreational demands. It thus seems plausible that users approach challenges that match their present physiological states and may withdraw from potentially threatening challenges (Blascovich, 2008). It is unlikely, for example, that individuals would enjoy engaging in challenges that threaten seriously their homeostatic balance (Rozin, 1999). Instead, they tend to approach and enjoy challenges that match their physiological

needs (Brondel & Cabanac, 2007). By definition, challenges bear a certain risk (Apter, 1992). Accordingly, attempts to master a challenge require self-regulation and sufficient volitional energy. Exhausted or depleted users may thus fail to enjoy challenges in which engagement and mastery demand self-regulation and volitional energy (Schmeichel, Demaree, Robinson, & Pu, 2006). Exhausted users may be prone to engage in comparatively less demanding challenges.

If cognitive resources are already exhausted, for example, stressed users are unlikely to seek the challenge of comprehending a complex philosophical book (Schmeichel et al., 2003), even if reading promises to reduce arousal and enhance psychological growth. Rather, such users may enjoy watching a mildly cognitively challenging movie. Likewise, depleted individuals who seek excitement may be interested in arousal-stimulating challenges presented via familiar and predictable content. They may enjoy, for example, recovering exhausted resources by sitting on the sofa and watching a familiar, yet arousing, thriller movie.

### Conclusion

Based on a review of existing media entertainment research, this chapter argues that users feel entertained provided media induce enjoyable states and sensations. The core argument is that users enjoy media exposure to the extent that it assists their tendencies to recreate and grow psychologically. More specifically, media exposure is enjoyable – and thus entertaining – if it allows users to balance their physiological states and recover exhausted resources. Additionally, each media stimulus imposes a set of cognitive, affective, and occasional behavioral challenges. Users may enjoy engaging autonomously in mediated challenges which are relevant, of optimal difficulty and mastery or which indicate psychological growth. However, users may enjoy engaging in challenges only within the boundaries of their recreational needs.

Taken together, the present approach argues that media entertainment results from successful recreation and psychological growth. Similar approaches to media entertainment have been suggested in the past. Evolutionary approaches to media entertainment (Miron, 2006; Ohler & Nieding, 2006) share the idea with the present approach that enjoyment results from the stimulation of evolutionarily evolved and thus formerly adaptive pleasure systems. Another similar approach has recently been suggested by Tamborini et al. (2010). In their approach, they argue that media enjoyment results from the satisfaction of lower-order (e.g., physiological) needs and higher-order (e.g., intrinsic/self-actualization) needs. In their study, they provide preliminary empirical evidence that the satisfaction of intrinsic needs indeed underlies media enjoyment. Tamborini et al.'s (2010) satisfaction of lower-order needs is reminiscent of the recreational mechanisms reviewed in the present chapter, whereas the satisfaction of (intrinsic) higher-order needs is reminiscent of enjoyment derived from psychological growth.

## A Concluding Remark on the Adaptive Function of Media Entertainment

The present perspective links media entertainment to evolutionary adaptive mechanisms. Namely, enjoyment derived from recreation and psychological growth. This corresponds to the general notion that pleasure is tied to adaptive mechanisms (Cabanac et al., 1997; Damasio, 1999; Dutton, 2009; Kahneman et al., 1997; Miron, 2006; Rozin, 1999; White, 1959). It is tempting to speculate that media entertainment still provides adaptive functions today. For example, it is clear that people need to occasionally relax and recover. It thus seems adaptive that exhausted resources are recovered and imbalanced physiological states become balanced. Entertaining media stimuli are easily accessible tools that may help effectively accomplish these needs (Reinecke, 2009a, 2009b; Repetti, 1989). In addition, media exposure may result in psychological growth and thus improve individuals' capabilities to interact effectively with their environment.

However, while this may suggest that individuals adapt to their environment when entertained by the media, the underlying mechanisms of this adaption evolved throughout phylogenesis in a remarkably different environment thousands of years ago. Accordingly, they may not necessarily foster adaptive behavior today. For example, in some parts of the world, the once adaptive mechanism of finding sweet and energy-rich food pleasurable may now lead to obesity. Likewise, it does not appear adaptive if obese people – reinforced by enjoyment – prefer media challenges to comparable, yet physically more demanding challenges, in the real world. Further, individuals may fail to adapt to their living environment if they continuously seek escape via the media rather than coping actively with existing problems in the real world (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). It remains to be seen whether such non-adaptive media entertainment outcomes are the exception or the rule.

## NOTE

- 1 Differing mechanisms may explain this principle. Pleasure may outweigh aversive sensations throughout an exposure period, as users reappraise directly aversive sensations as something positive (Andrade & Cohen, 2007). In contrast, aversive sensations may dominate throughout the exposure period (without much positive reappraisal), yet intense states of pleasure, typically at the end of exposure, allow the overall experience to be framed as enjoyable (Zillmann, 2006).

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## 8

## Selective Exposure to Violent Media

### *A Synthesis of the Research and Theoretical Overview*

Marina Krcmar

#### ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the research that has examined individuals' interest in media violence. It reviews definitions of media violence, as well as affect-based approaches to attraction to media violence (i.e., mood management and mood adjustment) and reviews the research findings that use this approach. Next, it reviews disposition-based theories that focus on how individuals evaluate media characters, form affiliations with them, and affectively respond to them. Disposition-based theories offer one possible explanation for attraction to media violence. Functional approaches (e.g., threat mastery) and psychological correlates of interest in media violence are also explored. Lastly, it proposes that social cognitive theory, when viewed as a meta-theory or meta-approach to interest in media violence, may offer an over-arching model to integrate the various perspectives reviewed in the chapter.

### The Appeal of Media Violence

Concern about the effects of violent media date back at least as far as the 1920s when the Payne Fund studies investigated the effect of film violence on children (Lowrey & DeFleur, 1995) (Chapter 10, this volume). However, implicit in this concern is the

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